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ABSTRACT

Many freshmen come to English courses thinking that they generally dislike poetry and that in particular they dislike writing critical essays about poetry. Two strategies which are effective in helping students overcome their own negative perceptions are to allow students to: (1) engage in transactional reader response; and (2) explore poetry through both creative and reflexive writing. Allowing students to share responses to poems in small-group discussions emphasizes the full interplay between book and reader. These discussions also allow students who are uncertain of themselves and their interpretations of poetry to become participants at this level. This same exchange of ideas can form the core of writing strategies. Focusing on multicultural ballads and narrative poems and exploring fresh perspectives on language and experience gives students confidence to make connections with a wide range of poetry. A two-part final writing assignment can involve creating an original ballad or narrative poem, and writing a short paper about this creative process, documented in a log. Within the process of creating their own poems, reflecting on the creative process, and sharing their writing within their groups, students are freed from the idea that poets and their poems belong to an alien and privileged discourse. Examples of students' poems and essays demonstrate that not only do students share their own voices and those of others, they also collaborate in a process which demystifies poetry. (Contains 17 references.) (NH)

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Making Connections with Poetry: Multicultural Voices in Process

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Dias, who has researched student responses to poetry for a number of years, found that "readers' strategies, more often than not, develop from classroom practices" (134). He contended that students' classroom experiences with literature influence their expectations before they ever begin reading: "Readers' expectations as to what they must read for are powerful determiners of how they will approach other texts in the same genre" (134-135).

Compounding the problem of student attitudes toward poetry is the reluctance of many secondary teachers to teach any poetry beyond what is required. All too often, their stance on teaching poetry is a result of their own classroom experiences with poetry. Dias and Hayhoe found that such attitudes about poetry, on the part of students and teachers, "prevail in schools in most English-speaking countries" (142).

My own students were no exception to this world-wide dilemma. When I began planning a poetry unit for my Freshman English courses, I decided to try something different to reverse this trend. I made reduction of risk and personal transaction with poetry primary objectives in my teaching strategies. I already knew the many of the students disliked poetry--or thought they did. They particularly disliked writing critical essays about poetry. I wanted to help them overcome their own negative perceptions, those "powerful determiners" that Dias believes influence readers' strategies. To accomplish those objectives, I encouraged transactional reader responses (Rosenblatt) and both creative and reflective writing as a way of exploring poetry.

My teaching strategies for the poetry unit evolved from several theoretical perspectives. I combined what I knew about writing as a process (Elbow; Murray), collaborative learning in literature instruction (Bleich; Fish), and reader response (Holland; Iser; Rosenblatt) in planning for teaching poetry. I felt it was important to create a socially mediated construction of response, one that emerged from the students' own questions and experiences.

A strategy that was important to a more student-centered approach to poetry was sharing responses to poems in small-group discussions. Rosenblatt emphasized not only the "full interplay between book and reader"

(107) in a transactional response but also the value of sharing that response with others:

> A free exchange of ideas will lead each student to scrutinize his own sense of the literary work in the light of others' opinions. The very fact that other students stress some aspects that he may have ignored...will suggest that perhaps he has not done justice to the text. He will turn to it again in order to point out the elements that evoked his response and to see what can justify the other students' responses. (110).

The small-group discussions also allowed students who were uncertain of themselves and their interpretations of poetry to become participants at this level. Some of these students rarely contributed to a whole-class discussion, but found small-groups a comfortable forum where they could risk exploration and questioning. This same exchange of ideas formed the core of our writing strategies. Students often shared written responses to poems and rough drafts of the final project.

I decided to introduce poetry by focusing on multicultural ballads and narrative poems. I had students who represented from a variety of ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic groups, and I reasoned that poems from different cultural perspectives might help students make a personal connection. I wanted to explore fresh perspectives on language and experiences, poetry that would optimize a transactional experience. This experience, I hoped, would give them the confidence to make connections with a wider range of poetry in the future.

The ballad seemed particularly appropriate as a beginning. The universal appeal of the ballad is based on its folk roots. Folk ballads, in particular, are by nature multicultural; they are found in the lore and literature of every culture. Their simple, dramatic stories offer the vividness and poignancy of life in unmitigated form. Unwed mothers kill their babies; unrequited lovers either pine away or murder their poor lovers; and many young lovers seek revenge for a real or imagined injury. On the first day, I began by reading aloud two older ballads that never fail to spark interest, in spite of the Scottish dialect: "The Cruel Mother" and "Bonny Barbara Allan." Reading the old ballads and narrative poems aloud lets students hear the strong rhythms and intonations that flavor these woeful and shocking stories.

We then moved into modern ballads like Dudley Randall's "Ballad of Birmingham" and "Dressed all in Pink." Randall's poems draw on a rich mosaic of traditions, from Scottish ballads to African-American folk poetry and spirituals. We also used contemporary Native American narrative poems like Geary Hobson's "Deer Hunting" and Louise Erdrich's "Captivity." The modern ballads were especially appealing to the students. For the first time, I had students asking me where they could find more poems by these poets.

I pointed out to students that they had probably sung or listened to ballads without realizing what they were, especially the American folk ballads, some of which became lyrics for popular songs in the sixties. The musical aspect of ballads intrigued many students. Those students who were knowledgeable about popular music suddenly became eager contributors, and invariably, I had someone wanting to share a recording of a popular ballad with the class, the kind of sharing that I welcomed.

To further emphasize the connections between ballads, narrative poems, and stories, I also used Robert Frost's "Out, out--" which tells the tragic story of a young boy who accidentally loses his hand to a chain saw and dies. After reading this poem aloud, I asked the students to write a response to anything that this poem reminded them of in their own lives. They shared these responses in small groups, and some students ended up using these initial pieces for the seed of their final project.

In Orality and Literacy, Ong pointed out that writing is "essentially a consciousness-raising activity" (151), a process which draws upon and shapes in deliberate ways what may have been unconscious:

> The very reflectiveness of writing--enforced by the slowness of the writing process as compared to oral delivery as well as by the isolation of the writer as compared to the oral performer--encourages growth of consciousness out of the unconscious. (150)

Writing also encourages, through reflection, a self-initiated learning process. Zinsser argued that writing is "how we think our way into a subject and make it our own" (16). He described the writing process as a vehicle which "enables us to find out what we know--and what we don't know--about whatever we're trying to learn" (16). The focus of the final assignment brought all of the connections together in a two-part writing assignment. The first part involved creating an original ballad or narrative poem. I invited the students

to use a traditional ballad form with *abcb* quatrains or to use a narrative format and to experiment freely with any poetic conventions with which they were already familiar.

The second part of the assignment involved their keeping a log in which they documented their creative process. From this log, they wrote a short paper (2 to 3 typed pages). I gave them a list of questions designed to help them think about important parts of the creative process that they might want to describe in their log and subsequent essay. The questions were helpful in several ways. For those who were unfamiliar with a process log, the questions clarified the nature of the log. The questions also helped them to focus on aspects of their own writing process that they had never thought about before. Some of the questions follow:

How did I decide on a topic for my poem?
Where and when did I write my poem?
What were some of my thoughts as I began writing?
Was it hard to get started? If so, why?
When did I really gain momentum in writing the poem?
What words or lines caused me problems?
What kinds of changes did I make and why did I make them?
Who else read the poem and what were their reactions?
What words or phrases do I particularly like?
How do I feel about the completed poem?
If I could talk to a famous poet, what questions would I ask
him or her about the composing process?

The students shared drafts of their poems in their writing groups three times over two weeks. During the sharing of drafts, they had others in the group read their poems both aloud and silently. Hearing their own poems read by others seemed especially helpful to them, and, again, allowed the kind of heteroglossic exchange which Bakhtin described as a dynamic force in freeing discourse from the usual academic constraints: "...in this mirror of constantly evolving heteroglossia--any direct word and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal" (60).

My strategy focused on helping the students to push beyond their prior conceptions of poetry and to explore their own ways of representing the

creative side of poetry. For many of my students, exploring poetry and writing within small-group was a new experience. Within the process of creating their own poems, reflecting on the creative process, and sharing their writing within their groups, students were freed from the idea that poets and their poems belong to an alien and privileged discourse. They explored their own voices and those of others. Not only were the students sharing their voices and ideas, but they were also collaboratively involved in a process which demystified poetry.

Many students created poems in which they shared personal experiences which had shaped their own lives in some way. Sharon (all names of students in this article are pseudonyms), an African-American student, who had taken the course twice before and failed it, wrote a powerful narrative poem about seeing her father shot when she was a child. Although she was willing to share her poem, she was not willing to share her essay because of her insecurities about her writing. Her use of space and perspective is very effective; she moves from the top of the ferris wheel, where everyone below looked like ants, to the earth again where she sees, up close, the bloodied body of her father. Her poem follows:

Flying in Eureka Park

I remember...
Soaring through the air
higher and freer
than ever before.
My fingers tightly squeezing the
chains that had become extensions
of my fingertips.
The squirrels climbed trees annoyed
at people that had taken over their park.

I remember...
The still of the clear summertime day
The impatience of honking cars annoyed at people
that had taken over their park.
The merry-go-round that had suddenly sprouted

arms and legs.
I rose higher still...

I remember...
Them standing there below me
like a colony of ants
while I flew and searched for my daddy
amongst the ants.
The shot rang out
and suddenly I felt myself
falling and frantically reaching
for the chains that were
once again chains, cold against my palms...
plummeting down like Icarus.

I remember...
that just before I hit the ground
next to the big tree
I saw the collapsed and bloodied body
of an ant--
that had become my father.

In the essay that accompanied her poem, Sharon explained that she was only nine years old when she saw her father shot. Even though he recovered, she said the experience had given her nightmares for years afterward. When I asked Sharon if I could put her poem on the overhead to share with other students in the class, she was pleased and overwhelmed. She said she had never had a teacher ask to use her work.

Naomi, a Jewish student, who was very insecure about her writing, chose to write about her grandfather's experiences in Nazi Germany. In her essay, she explains her reasons for writing the poem:

> I decided to incorporate history and personal tragedy together to write about an event in history that tragically affected my entire family. History books cannot teach us what it was like to go through what European Jews did during World War II. Jewish families know this, so they pass the history down in the form of stories. One such story that

was passed down to me was how my grandfather watched his family being executed right before his eyes all because of their religion. This is something that is very hard to forgive and forget for many Jews. I began to think about all that I have learned through this story and decided to write about it.

While reading my poem the reader might not pick up on all of the minute details that are very symbolic to me or understand why I chose some of the words that I did, unless they know some of the background of my grandfather. My grandfather was born in 1919 in Poland, which made him about twenty when the war started. All of the facts about my grandfather's story are one hundred percent accurate because he blocked out most of his memories, enabling him to survive. For the longest time he refused to acknowledge that he was in concentration camps, to talk about what happened, or even to wear short-sleeved shirts until three or four years ago because of the number burned into his arms. My family and I have been able to piece together some information concerning his family, but we cannot tell whether he does or does not remember because it has been blocked out for so long.....

Repetition of the word "Death" in the poem is used to symbolize all of the deaths in my family because of the war. My great grandfather was shot while trying to escape and died in my grandfather's arms. My grandmother's mother and aunt did not even make it out of the village, but were gunned down in the village instead. All of his relatives died in the numerous camps that they were sent to because of the horrible living and working conditions, and the deaths caused by planned executions.....

All the symbols and images in this poem are those that I get from my grandfather everytime I see him. He does not have to say a word; I just feel these things and see it in his eyes.

In the poem that evolved from these family stories, Naomi assumed the voice of the grandfather who had been unable to use his own voice to recall the horrifying experiences of his past. She explained in her essay that she deliberately capitalized some of the words to emphasize their meaning. Her poem follows:

The Tanks Growled

The tanks growled and hummed through the streets,
tearing up the cobblestones
as if they were only made of glass,
hard, heavy, hammering in a young boy's mind.

From those tanks, all that could be seen
was hard stone-cold eyes of the Nazi soldiers,
Feelings withdrawn,
doing only a Job that was assigned.

Death permeated the night air
letting my village know
that our Worst Fear was about to come true;
Death, Concentration camps, and much Worse.

My age was that of only twenty years,
but I knew, my mind like a wise old man's,
that Death was very near,
no turning Back, no hiding, no crying.

I thought to myself, we must fight
like my four older brothers,
risking life and limb for what we believe,
not passively walk toward Death like cattle.

But go we did, for those first few years,
and die we did; women, children, some infants as well,
Innocent
all because of one little German.

Death fluttered over me but still I lived,
through Dachau, Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and months
in the woods,
Starving, Working, and watching loved ones Die.

I am all that's left, me and my memories.
But even my memories are filled with Grief and Them,
Killing my brothers, watching them Die in my arms.
Because of this my story must be told, so nobody else
will be forced to go through the horror and Death
that stole not only my family and my childhood,
but my memories, my sanity, and my life.

Randy, who was ten years older than most of the students in the class, had been an auto mechanic in the years since he graduated from high school. He grew up in Appalachia and was the first one in his family to attempt college. Frost's poem, "Out, out--," reminded him of a story he had head about his grandfather. In his process essay, he carefully delineates his purpose in writing a poem about his grandfather:

> In writing this poem, three important aspects had to be communicated in order for the reader to understand the story I wanted to tell. The first of these aspects was the old man's character. My grandfather was a remarkable man. As a nine-year-old living in rural North Carolina, he had to quit school and go to work in a saw mill to help support his family during very difficult times. By the time he was fourteen, he was a construction supervisor....He never furthered his education. He was able to use his simple powers of observation and his keen manual labor skills....The line, "uncommonly keen of hand and common wit," as well as the rest of the stanza was written to give the reader a sense of the old man's ability to weather any changes that might occur in life. Also developing the old man's character in this stanza was particularly useful as this allows the reader to see that the old man's actions in the last stanza are consistent with his character....
>
> I have modeled much of what I want to accomplish in my life after well-rounded men like Thomas Jefferson, who was not only a brilliant statesman but an accomplished architect, builder, inventor, and writer. Completing this poem means a step in the direction of such well-roundedness for me. I feel as though I have made a start in developing an ability to write.

Randy's poem about his grandfather, a North Carolina farmer, follows:

Tribute to a North Carolina Farmer

An old man I knew
Uncommonly keen of hand and common wit.
Sixty-five and unaware
Of the wrinkling
That old age is supposed to bear.

Alone,
Trotted into the woods
On his old Farmall tractor.
Deep in, uncut, he saw the fenceposts,
That's what he was after.

Robert's buzz-saw:
Sharp, tight, and ready.
One, two three pulls on the cord.
First spit, then cough,
At last! It roars!

Economy of motion
That was the sense of it.
Soon, a large stack;
Of a wagon-load
All but one he lacked.

Caution disregarded
Time consumed, the cost.
Across his leg, he propped the slender trunk;
Robert's buzz-saw got its chance,
And into a knee it jumped.

Alone,
Trotted back to his house
On his Farmall tractor.

Saturday evening, middle of nowhere:
Bleed to death time he found a doctor.

"What to do? What's useful?"
He'd seen a doctor do it.
Needle and thread, kitchen light:
The old man closed the wound
and sewed it, tight.

What became apparent to me as I read through these poems and their accompanying essays were the rich contexts that the essays provided for the voices of these novice poets. Bakhtin emphasized the importance of the contextual elements as the lifeblood of our language:

> For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (293)

By offering the students opportunities to hear other voices and to explore their own, we went far beyond adding a few "multicultural" poems to a traditional unit. They were also hearing and seeing "socially charged" words that told stories of other lived experiences, other perspectives.

This kind of exploring and sharing can be invaluable to freshman students at the college level who are learning to deal with multiple perspectives (Perry). One student wrote at the end of the quarter:

> Seeing other people's papers made me more aware of how I write. I think that reading other people's papers is beneficial to them. You get a sense of other opinions and viewpoints and some good criticism. I think it was beneficial to me even if I felt attacked. I realized that I wasn't the only one reading my paper.

Another student wrote about the final assignment:

> I personally found the poetry projects to be a great idea. I'm the type of person that does not understand completely what they have read. So by hearing the projects I learned more about poetry.

Another talked about the value of group discussions:

> I feel that group discussions have helped me understand the poems in depth. You not only get your interpretation but also those of your classmates which in several cases is totally different. This makes one have a broader view of any subject.

As Bruner pointed out, shared meanings constitute our whole process of constructing meaning: "Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating differences in meaning and interpretation" (13). Opening avenues of discourse to *all* members of a classroom allows each student the opportunity to develop what Belenky at al. referred to as an "authentic voice" (209) and what Perry saw as the key to intellectual growth:

> To observe both an act and its context, one requires an alternate context in which to stand. In offering a plurality of contexts, Relativism provides the ground for detachment and for objectivity. Although the objectivity obtainable is always qualified by the nature of the contexts in which one stands back to observe, it is nonetheless a radical and powerful departure. It may well rank with language as the distinctive triumph of the human mind. (126)

The union of voices in the poems and essays charged what some would call relatively unsophisticated poems with the power of lived experience. The essays offer a lens of intentionality through which the reader is able to see the contexts of imagination. Through such explorations of process, each speaker is empowered by reflections that reveal the common human experiences from which creative impulses arise.

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